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## The eagle has crash-landed

**Despite an unprecedented media campaign, Prabowo Subianto's political fallen flat – for now**

Dirk Tomsa



'Beware! Killers surround us! We remember those who were abducted and killed. We do not forget, we do not forgive.'  
An image popular among Indonesian users of Facebook

Ten years ago it seemed Subianto's political career had really begun. During the New Order, the former notorious special forces commander led a power struggle against Suharto and was subsequently appointed to the military. Accused of involvement in the abduction of student activists and instigation of the anti-Clinton protests in May 1998, the former special forces president Suharto considered the country and went into self-imposed exile in Japan to attend to business, manage international oil and gas interests, and a number of high-stake deals. He is a billionaire brother, busir Djojohadikusumo.

In the meantime, Prabowo, days in the army, Wiranto, enjoyed a brief moment in the sun. Having outmaneuvered Suharto during the turbulent days of the transition, the former adjutant of Suharto was instrumental in helping Suharto to Wahid to an unexpected stint at the presidency in 1999. But to Wiranto's disappointment, Wahid did not bring the desired recompense. Instead of being rewarded with the vice presidency, he had to make do with a ministerial post. Shortly afterwards, Wahid added insult to injury when he removed Wiranto from the cabinet. Thus, merely two years after the fall of Suharto it seemed, for a short while, there was no place for either Wiranto or Prabowo in Indonesia's new democracy.

**Two years after the fall of Suharto it seemed there was no place for Prabowo in Indonesia's new democracy**

It did not take long for the two to attempt political comebacks. In 2004, Wiranto and P candidates in Golkar's national convention to select a presidential candidate. Wiranto huge amounts of money at the convention in order to secure a place in Indonesia's first presidential election. In the end the former commander-in-chief of the armed forces did not win the convention, but he failed to make it all the way to the palace, finishing third in the presidential election. Undeterred by the defeat, Wiranto then moved on to found his own party (Hanura) and ran for the next elections in 2009.

His old foe Prabowo, meanwhile, was not just sitting idly by. In fact, it seemed as if the 2004 convention had only whetted his appetite for politics. Watching Wiranto's activities began to get ready for the next elections. In contrast to his half-hearted campaign in 2004, he meant business. Assisted by a high-profile media consultancy firm from the United States, he crafted an elaborate strategy which he hoped would eventually elevate him to the highest office. It consisted of three main pillars: first, mobilisation of support for his bid; second, enhancing his organisational vehicle; and third, finding a niche in the political spectrum that would distinguish himself from other candidates.

### **Finding the right vehicle**

Prabowo's first step was to assume control over one of Indonesia's biggest mass organisations, the farmers' association HKTI (Himpunan Kerukunan Tani Indonesia). Created during the Suharto era as a corporatist tool for Suharto to monitor Indonesia's millions of peasants, this organisation fell into political oblivion after 1998, but its vague affiliation with the rural masses made it an ideal vehicle for Prabowo because it provided him with an opportunity to begin his image-building campaign as a champion of the poor. In December 2004 he was elected HKTI chairman with 99% of the votes – never mind that he was not even a member of the association at that time.

The HKTI position provided Prabowo with valuable access to an organisational base, but for the 2009 elections he needed more than the chairmanship of a mass organisation. Indonesian law dictates that only candidates who are nominated by political parties are allowed to contest an election, so in order to avoid dependence on the goodwill of an already existing party, he did what various other retired generals had done before him: he created a new party of his own. The Movement for a Great Indonesia (Gerakan Indonesia Raya) was born, a party with a fierce-looking Garuda eagle as its symbol (Garuda is the centrepiece of Indonesia's national coat of arms). From the day of its founding in 2008, Gerindra dedicated itself almost exclusively to promoting the presidential ambitions of Prabowo Subianto.

At first sight, Gerindra appeared to be not much different from the various other parties established by retired generals in recent years. Just like Edi Sudradjat's PKPI, Hartono's recently Wiranto's Hanura, Gerindra too seemed to stand for little more than conservatism, imbued with a touch of New Order nostalgia. And yet, many observers were much more impressed with Gerindra than the other parties formed by retired officers. A closer look at the composition of its board and its advisory council reveals why. Formally led by a largely unknown forestry official Suhardi, Gerindra provides a political home for a number of controversial former generals, many of whom are dogged by persistent allegations of gross human rights violations. Amongst the most controversial is Kairupan, a former intelligence officer with a dubious track record in East Timor. Much more controversial is Prabowo himself, whose list of alleged human rights violations includes the abduction of rights activist Munir in September 2004, and of course Prabowo himself, whose list of alleged human rights violations includes abduction, torture, and instigation of large-scale anti-Chinese riots. For this reason, Prabowo caused particular alarm among human rights advocates, many of whom predicted his presidential campaign this year.

In order to dispel this image, Prabowo pursued an ingenious plan. To the disbelief of activists who now opposed his candidature, Prabowo approached some of his former troops to join his party. Why exactly former student activists like Desmond Mahesa or I Haryanto Taslam, a former leader of Megawati Soekarnoputri's PDI-P, all three of whom were in Prabowo's troops in 1998, agreed to support the presidential ambitions of their former commander was the subject of much speculation. Some observers have argued that they were simply trying to claim they may suffer from Stockholm syndrome (a psychological condition in which victims become emotionally attached to their hostage-taker). The three men themselves have denied the speculation and simply maintained that after Prabowo had apologised to them, it was

### An unprecedented media campaign

For Prabowo, people like Haryanto, Desmond and Pius represented important human capital used in his bid for the presidency. But the real weapon in Prabowo Subianto's struggle was an unprecedented media offensive which in mid-2008 ushered in the second phase of his campaign. While other parties were still in the planning stage, Prabowo began to inundate the public with an unparalleled bombardment of political advertisements.

**Buoyed by a self-confidence bordering on hubris, Prabowo used these advertisements to liken himself to statesmen ranging from Napoleon to Barack Obama**

Buoyed by a self-confidence bordering on hubris, Prabowo used these advertisements to feature an array of past and present statesmen, ranging from Napoleon and Sukarno to Barack Obama. His advertisements featured the majestic Garuda eagle and consistently highlighted the achievements of Suharto administrations to realise Indonesia's huge economic potential. To fund this campaign, the soldier-cum-businessman-cum-politician had to dig deep into his pockets (and those of his supporters). According to a Gerindra official, the media campaign alone cost about US\$100 million, with much more spent on other campaign activities.

Throughout his media offensive, Prabowo portrayed himself as the only presidential candidate capable of liberating Indonesia from the yoke of rural poverty, unemployment and foreign debt. What very few observers had predicted, however, was the solution Prabowo proposed to the alleged malaise. Driven by the need to distinguish himself from his rivals, the man who had largely relied on strategic maneuvers on global financial markets and to his connections to some of the most powerful elite families campaigned on a quasi-socialist platform, criticising the government's privatisation agenda and proposing revisions of existing contracts with foreign companies like Exxon. Given Prabowo's background, this may sound cynical, but the 'anti-neoliberal' stance did stand out from his rivals. And in view of the electoral success of other big-spending politicians like Hugo Chavez or perhaps Thaksin Shinawatra the strategy made sense, especially in the midst of a financial crisis.

### Was it all in vain?

So why did it not work? Even though Prabowo had implemented his campaign strategy, at the start, Gerindra got less than five per cent of the vote (Wiranto's Hanura party fared even less, only about three per cent). A number of reasons probably account for this poor result: discomfort amongst many Indonesians about Prabowo's hardline image and his humble beginnings; as well as widespread apprehension about his links to the Suharto family. Taken together, they provided a substantial deterrent for many voters. Arguably the most important reason for his defeat was despite the global financial crisis the overall socio-economic conditions in Indonesia were not ripe for the emergence of a populist saviour.

**The man who owed his fortune to strategic global financial connections to some of Indonesia's most powerful elite families came to power on a quasi-socialist platform**

Thanks largely to the government's three-phase 'direct cash assistance' (BLT) programme, Indonesians appear to be quite satisfied with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration. Significantly, the third phase of the BLT program was implemented in late March 2009, merely two weeks before the election: more than 18 million poor families received yet another sponsored cash injection of Rp 100,000 per month, to be distributed over a period of three months. Given these measures taken by the incumbent president, it is hardly surprising that few of the urban middle class and fisherfolk targeted by Prabowo saw a need for a radical overhaul of the economic system. Even those who may actually have seen this need were apparently reluctant to believe that it would be, of all people, Prabowo Subianto, who, to put it lightly, is hardly a philanthropist.

Another important reason for Prabowo's failure to push Gerindra to a better result was his essentially regressive vision. Despite the professional outlook of the advertisements, Gerindra was preoccupied primarily with romanticising the past rather than outlining the future. This was epitomised in a statement by Gerindra's deputy chairman Fadli Zon who maintained that the goal was 'to rebuild Indonesia just like how it was in the past when people gained prosperity from fishing'. Clearly, the election result showed that very few Indonesians share this desire for a return to the past. Thus, it could be argued that Prabowo may have revolutionised the style of political campaigning, but he failed to match his impressive style with a convincing message.

So Prabowo will not become Indonesia's next president, and neither will Wiranto. Does this mean that there really is no place for these two in Indonesia's democracy? Not quite. Despite their poor performance at the ballot box and poor approval ratings in most opinion polls, both Prabowo and Wiranto are still vice-presidential candidates for Megawati and Jusuf Kalla respectively. This may look like a technicality, but it will ensure that the two will continue to have a place in the system for years to come. Surprised if they run for president again in 2014. ii

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Inside Indonesia 97: Jul-Sep 2009



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